

# Proposed theme and topics for the USP dialogue with DPM

Second Revision  
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## Overview

In section 1, I outline the theme and concept. I have made some editions (mostly resulting in more condensed material), following comments on the first revision.

In section 2 I discuss the thought processes behind the theme more extensively.

In section 3, I list some possible discussion topics. These were included in the first revision of this proposal, but I have also made some slight editions.

In section 4, I list some alternative discussion questions. I have attempted to refer more specifically to current problems and recent events.

## 1 Proposed Theme and Concept

**Theme** “Beyond Hard Work”: Transformations in Singaporean Society and Outlook

**Concept** Undergraduate Dialogue with DPM, organized by the University Scholars Programme

**Blurb** As Singapore approaches its 50th anniversary of independence, how does the future look to be different than the present? The notion of ‘hard work’ is bound with the story of our nation’s history and values, but in changing times the message has been that work alone is not enough. As Singapura advances, how must its people prepare themselves to move forward?

### Amplifying the Theme

As Singapore approaches its 50th anniversary of independence, the sense that our society and our country’s situation in the world is changing has increasingly been the theme of public discussion. If we have indeed gone from Third World to First in a generation, then perhaps it is no wonder that the way forward seems less clear-cut than it was in the past. The vision and hard work of our pioneers are some of the things we remember when we revisit the past, but in changing times there is the sense that work alone is not enough.

## 2 Deriving the Theme: Context and Cases-In-Point

From the beginning, our areas of interest while developing the concept were economic transformation and social change. This was in light of the suggestions from the ministry about some of DPM's recent subjects of focus.

### 2.1 Economic Transformation

In terms of economic development, Singapore moved beyond the heavily industrial phase many years ago. While some industries remain important and active, whether any of these manufacturing industries will remain sustainable in Singapore in the long-term is, at the very least, uncertain. Beyond just manufacturing, it would seem that in almost any industry to do with physical goods at all, we will continue to see increasing competition from the large and rapidly developing economies around us.

Even before the northern sea route opened up, from about a decade ago the messages at national day rallies' and such were to prepare to compete in the knowledge economy by realizing the need for life-long learning. In the years following, naturally more schemes and policies were implemented, and so we hear more references to skills upgrading, and to things like the productivity and innovation credit scheme.

As I understand it, the logic behind the movement I've described in the above paragraphs has to do with the challenging problem of maintaining the potential for wage-growth and for improving quality-of-life for Singaporeans, in a situation where the ways further up the value chain become much more challenging to pursue. One way I might characterize the challenge is having to compete in the industries of the future, which I might characterize as being not only high-skilled but also complexly constituted. Along these lines, what I might argue is the trade-off the country must make is to maintain a modest and steady rate of growth, so as to have the optimal conditions to pursue the development of human capital, policy and strategy, certain kinds of infrastructure, etc. It is along these lines that the theme was conceived.

### 2.2 Social Change

At the same time, as both the initial suggestions from the ministry and Prof. Teo have made clear, there is an important relationship between social change and economic transformation, insofar as it becomes impossible to think about economic development in purely technical or abstract terms. A case in point would be the concept of productivity to begin with: thinking only of the conventional economic definition, which specifies some quantifiable factor, we find that we have a potentially useful quantitative metric, but that in reality it is a measure for something that we would have to concede is not countable, and which would philosophically speaking be an unknown human factor. This is a human factor which we attempt to understand in terms of culture, attitudes, values, habit and convention, social power, etc., and as much as we can imagine these things working towards some specific end, in truth the problem is multi-dimensional.

On the subject of social change, as well, one subject of discussion around the world at the moment is about the sustainability of capitalism, in terms of its effect on the distribution of wealth, the environment, etc. Focusing on just the problem of income inequality as a case in point, we see again that the human problems associated with inequality (or perceived inequality) are also multi-dimensional. Most of my thoughts

on problems in this vein come second-hand, as it were, so I will not dwell on this at length, but I hope that it also illustrates something else that fed into the conception of the theme, and how it seemed relevant to DPM's concerns as described in our preceding correspondence.

## 2.3 Questions and Motivation

If I had to condense the main drift of the preceding sections into one line of questioning, it would be: what kind of society do we want to work towards, how do we best achieve that vision, and why is 'best' so defined? But behind these questions lies another presumption which I would also question, this being that Singapore as we know it will persist. Another possibility is that it will be changed beyond recognition, which is a possibility that I will not discount.

The relevance of this question (about national identity, as it were) to our questions about social change and economic development is apparent in the debate about population and immigration. Beyond the technical questions regarding the future size of the labor force, defence force, etc., many of the questions brought up were qualitative, emotive, even philosophical: who is a Singaporean (*cf.* 'no true Scotsman'), what makes us so (passport? living or growing up here? sending money here? NS?), and what makes this country worth caring for?

Rather than seeing the above questions as irrelevant to the main discussion, I would propose to see them addressed in tandem with it, in much the same way as others have suggested that the development of the economy and society are really inter-linked rather than separable.

## 3 Topic Questions

*(From first revision.)*

### 1. Singapore, Past and Present

Singapore has enjoyed good, if not excellent, rates of economic growth in the decades since independence. How is our situation going to be different in the coming decades?

- Is Singapore in a different phase of economic and social development? If so, what are the significant differences between now and then?
- In what important ways are the world economic and political situation different than before?
- What are the most important challenges we face in the present? Are we prepared for the future?

### 2. Economic Transformation

What kind of economic development is Singapore aiming for in the coming years, and what does that mean for the younger generation?

- What kind of trade-offs do we face between growth and development?

- How are industries changing, and how is Singapore adapting? (E.g. manufacturing.)
- What are the prospects for local SMEs in an increasingly globalized knowledge economy? To what extent have productivity and innovation schemes helped them to adapt?
- If human capital is our only capital, should more of us go into teaching?

### 3. On Singaporean Society

What sort of changes, both positive and negative, is Singaporean society going through?

- What part do politicians, the media, institutions like this university, or society at large have to play in determining the way forward?
- In light of populist slogans like ‘Singapore for Singaporeans’, should we worry that Singaporeans have become too inward-looking? Conversely, is the problem instead a preoccupation with economic competition?
- How is the ‘Singaporean core’ a useful or important concept in policy-making?

## 4 Alternative Questions

*(From second revision.)*

### 4.1 Manufacturing in Singapore

While manufacturing comprises a large segment of the economy at present, given rising labor costs and land scarcity, are manufacturing industries sustainable in the long-term? What are the alternatives?

### 4.2 Immigration and Labor

How has the tightening of immigration policy affected businesses? Which industries have been most affected, and have small and large companies been affected equally?

### 4.3 Economic Restructuring

In countries like the USA, observers have commented on a ‘hollowing-out’ of the middle-class, with economic transformation leading to more demand for both high-skilled and lower-skilled labor, but at the expense of those with the wrong types of skills, i.e. that many will be underemployed or unemployable due to economic transformation. Is Singapore experiencing similar pressures, and how has it responded?

#### **4.4 Design(ed) Thinking for Creativity and Innovation**

In the National Design Centre on Middle Road, flow-charts about the efficiency of waste management processes and the design thinking process ('Observe. Understand. Test.') adorn the second floor of a building that initially presented itself as some kind of art venue or museum. Zooming out from the fact that WSQ courses are conducted at the venue, how well have efforts at promoting creativity and innovation things through education worked, and how can we tell? Aside from schools and courses, what are the alternatives?

#### **4.5 The Nation in the National Discourse**

Recent controversies related to public expression (censorship, regulation of alternative media, etc.) and the acknowledgment of civil/human rights by wider society have generated much debate in the media that echoes themes and positions from the debate in other countries. While some self-styled conservatives have appointed themselves to the work of keeping the country on track, is the nation they invoke the real Singapore? Relatedly, some self-styled social critics have claimed to be the faithful advocates of grass-roots sentiment. Which, then, is the real Singapore, and is there anything to be found in between?